

**Irish
in Britain**



**Heart Health
and the Irish community**





Introduction

Although it's no bigger than your fist, your heart has the mighty job of keeping blood flowing through the 60,000 miles of blood vessels that feed your organs and tissues.

Good cardiovascular health is essential for physical and mental wellness, yet coronary heart disease (CHD) remains one of the leading causes of death and disability in the UK with 68,000 lives lost annually—an average of 190 people every day.

Research

Research highlights even higher rates within the Irish community, underscoring the urgent need for a targeted campaign to improve heart health.

The Green Hearts campaign was created to address these challenges, promoting awareness, prevention and better health outcomes across our vibrant diaspora. Irish in Britain extends sincere thanks to everyone helping us share the Green Hearts message.

Heart Health

Heart health is a significant concern for the Irish community, with evidence linking high rates of coronary heart disease, hypertension and stroke to elevated mortality levels. These conditions also increase the risk of vascular dementia. While age is a factor in heart disease, many contributing risks stem from lifestyle habits developed over a lifetime, which are also linked to other diseases such as cancer and dementia.

The good news is that it is never too early or too late to adopt heart-healthy habits. By taking proactive steps, you can improve your heart health and lower the risk of many other common health conditions.

This booklet is packed with useful information to help you stay healthy, including:

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Blood Pressure

High Blood Pressure

High blood pressure or hypertension often has no noticeable symptoms, which is why it is sometimes called the “silent killer”.

Around one-third of adults in Britain and Ireland have high blood pressure although many are unaware of it. If left untreated, hypertension can increase your risk of serious conditions such as heart disease, stroke, dementia and kidney or heart failure. The good news is that even a small reduction in your blood pressure can significantly lower these risks.

Low Blood Pressure

Low blood pressure or hypotension occurs when blood pressure levels are lower than normal. While it is often harmless and symptom-free, low blood pressure can sometimes cause dizziness, fainting or even shock if blood flow to vital organs is inadequate.

If you frequently experience symptoms of low blood pressure, consult your doctor. They can identify potential causes and suggest helpful changes such as staying well-hydrated, modifying your diet or adjusting medications.

Key Takeaway:

Maintaining a healthy blood pressure balance is vital for heart health. Both high and low blood pressure can impact your wellbeing, so regular monitoring is an effective way to ensure your levels stay within a healthy range.

Did you know?

50% of the Irish and UK population with high blood pressure are unaware that they have the condition

Check your blood pressure

The only way of knowing whether you have high blood pressure is to have a blood pressure test. All adults over 40 are advised to have their blood pressure checked at least every 5 years. Getting this done is easy and could save your life.

You can get your blood pressure tested at a number of places, including:

- at your GP surgery
- at some pharmacies
- as part of your NHS Health Check

You can also check your blood pressure yourself with a home blood pressure monitor. You can purchase one at any pharmacy or online.

Treatment for high blood pressure

Some people with high blood pressure may take medication to stop their blood pressure getting too high. Making healthy lifestyle changes can sometimes help reduce your chances of getting high blood pressure and help lower your blood pressure if it's already high. Talk to your doctor to help you decide which treatment would work best for you.

How to measure your blood pressure

Blood pressure is measured using two numbers. The first number (systolic) represents the highest level your blood pressure reaches when your heart beats. The second number (diastolic) is the lowest level your blood pressure reaches when your heart relaxes between beats.

As a general guide:

- High blood pressure is considered to be 140/90mmHg or higher.
- Ideal blood pressure typically falls between 90/60mmHg and 120/80mmHg.

If your blood pressure is between 120/80mmHg and 140/90mmHg, it may indicate you are at risk of developing high blood pressure in the future, unless you take steps to manage it.

Don't miss the back of this booklet, where you'll find a blood pressure measurement chart and a dedicated page to log your readings.



Cholesterol

What is Cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a fatty substance that helps build the outside of our cells, produces certain hormones, creates bile and makes vitamin D. While some cholesterol comes from our diet, most is made by the liver. Cholesterol is important for good health, but too much can build up in the walls of our arteries, causing them to narrow and increasing the risk of heart disease and stroke.

What Causes High Cholesterol?

Anyone can have high cholesterol, even if they are slim, eat well and stay active. Most people don't have obvious symptoms. Cholesterol levels can be affected by your family history, age, lifestyle, medications and certain medical conditions. The higher your cholesterol, the higher your risk of heart attack and stroke.

You can't tell if you have high cholesterol without a blood test so it is important to have one.

When Will I Have a Cholesterol Test?

In England, a cholesterol test (lipid profile) is often part of an NHS Health Check. Your GP may also check your cholesterol if they think you could have high levels. If you have had a heart attack, stroke or have coronary heart disease, your doctor will regularly check your cholesterol levels.

What Are Normal Cholesterol Levels?

Cholesterol levels can vary from person to person but generally:

- Non-HDL (bad cholesterol) should be 4mmol/L or below.
- LDL (bad cholesterol) should be below 3mmol/L.
- HDL (good cholesterol) should be 1mmol/L or above for men and 1.2mmol/L or above for women.
- Total cholesterol should be 5mmol/L or below.
- Total cholesterol to HDL ratio should be 6 or below.

These are general guidelines. Talk to your doctor about your cholesterol results and what levels are best for you.

Managing High Cholesterol and Reducing Risk

If your doctor tells you that you have high cholesterol, they're likely referring to the 'bad cholesterol' (LDL), which can increase your risk of heart attack and stroke. To manage it, your doctor may recommend lifestyle changes such as eating a diet lower in saturated fats and exercising regularly. They may also prescribe medication to help lower your cholesterol levels.

If you have familial hypercholesterolemia (a genetic condition that causes high cholesterol), medication will be essential to control your levels. Your doctor will discuss the best treatment options with you.

For those with coronary heart disease, taking statins has been shown to lower the risk of heart attack or stroke even if your cholesterol levels are already within the healthy range.



Recognising the signs of a heart attack

Heart attack and stroke symptoms vary but recognising the common signs could save a life.

Main Symptoms:

- Chest pain: tightness, pressure or feeling like a heavy weight.
- Pain may spread to the arms, neck, jaw or back.
- Shortness of breath, sweating, nausea and faintness.

If you or someone else has any of these symptoms, call 999 immediately. It is a medical emergency that may need urgent treatment.

While Waiting for an Ambulance:

- Rest and avoid exerting yourself.
- If available and you're not allergic, chew and swallow an aspirin (300mg). Aspirin helps thin the blood and improves blood flow to the heart.

Cardiac Arrest

If someone stops breathing, isn't moving and doesn't respond:

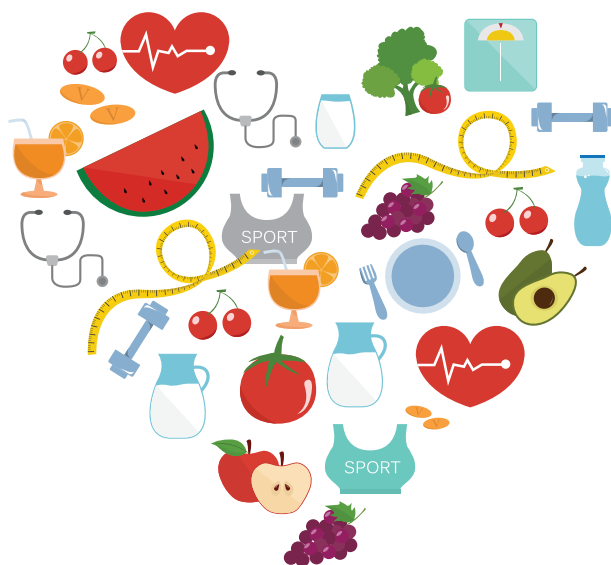
- Call 999 right away.
- Start CPR immediately and if available, use an automated external defibrillator (AED).

Hands-Only CPR:

1. Place one hand on the centre of the chest, the other on top.
2. Press down 5-6cm using your body weight, not just your arms.
3. Aim for 100-120 compressions per minute. Continue CPR until help arrives.

Using an AED: If an AED is available, use it. The device helps restore a normal heartbeat during a cardiac arrest by delivering an electric shock if needed.

A Stroke happens when a clot or rupture interrupts blood flow to the brain.



Recognising the signs of a stroke

The signs and symptoms of a stroke vary from person to person but usually begin suddenly. As different parts of your brain control different parts of your body, your symptoms will depend on the part of your brain affected and the extent of the damage.

Up to 90% of strokes are preventable. By learning about the stroke risk factors, we can understand more about how to combat and prevent them.

When it comes to a stroke, you must **BE FAST**.







It is important for everyone to be aware of these signs and symptoms, particularly if you live with or care for a person who is in a high-risk group, such as someone

who is elderly or has diabetes or high blood pressure.



BE FAST: RECOGNISING THE SIGNS OF A STROKE

When it comes to a stroke, you must **BE FAST**

					
B BALANCE	E EYES	F FACE	A ARM	S SPEECH	T TIME
The person has sudden dizziness or loss of coordination	A sudden loss of vision in one, or both eyes, or double vision, occurs	Ask the person to smile. Is the smile lopsided?	Ask the person to raise both arms. Can they keep them there?	Ask the person to repeat a simple sentence. Is it hard to understand?	If any of these symptoms exist, call 999 or 112

For more information, visit Green Hearts Campaign on www.irishinbritain.org

Women and Heart Health

One in four women die from heart disease and stroke, the same as men. However, heart disease and stroke in women are often under-researched, under-diagnosed and under-treated.

Are heart attack symptoms different for men and women?

Symptoms vary from person to person, but no symptoms are more common in women than in men. Misconceptions around heart attack symptoms may delay treatment and diagnosis in women, leading to worse outcomes.

Did you know?

After menopause, women's risk of heart disease and stroke increases due to:

- Lower oestrogen levels, which can raise blood pressure and cholesterol

Menopause symptoms like night sweats and poor sleep

Changes in body shape, muscle, and fat stores

The good news is that 80% of premature heart disease and stroke are preventable through lifestyle changes. We know many women are aware of what constitutes a healthy lifestyle, but modern life can get in the way.

What can I do?

Manage stress

Menopause can be a stressful time due to hormonal changes and symptoms such as hot flushes and disrupted sleep.

Did you know?

Coronary heart disease kills more than twice as many women as breast cancer each year in the UK yet it is often considered a man's disease.

This stress may lead to unhealthy habits like poor diet, smoking or increased alcohol intake which can all impact your heart.

Taking time out for yourself is crucial.

- Exercise regularly, doing activities you enjoy
- Get outside in nature, which boosts mental health
- Keep a regular sleep routine
- Eat a balanced, healthy diet
- Try breathing exercises or meditation
- Stay connected to friends and family
- Relax through activities like reading, drawing or listening to music

Aim to be active for at least 30 minutes, five days a week—or whatever feels right for you.

Physical activity is key in preventing heart disease and stroke and can help ease some menopause symptoms. Activities such as cycling, fast walking or swimming are great and breaking up long sitting periods with movement also helps.

Eat well

- Include more fruit and vegetables in your diet
- Eat fish twice a week
- Limit processed foods, chips, pizza, biscuits and cakes

While there is no magic cure for menopause symptoms, research shows a Mediterranean-style diet may reduce the risk of heart disease and help manage symptoms like hot flushes and low mood. This diet is rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, nuts, seeds, fish and seafood while being low in processed foods, sugar, salt and red meat. Hormone Replacement Therapy has also been shown to help with many symptoms, see below for more detail.

Know your GP

If you're over 30, have your blood pressure and cholesterol checked at least every five years. Your GP will assess your overall risk and guide you on managing it.

Medication

There are various medications available to help manage heart conditions. It's important to talk to your doctor about the options that are right for you.

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), commonly used to relieve menopause symptoms has also been shown to reduce the risk of coronary heart disease, heart attack and stroke. HRT works by replacing hormones that help protect your heart.

Always take any prescribed medication exactly as directed by your doctor.

Questions to ask your GP

- What are my blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar levels?
- What do these levels mean for my heart health?
- What can I do to improve them?
- What are my BMI and waist circumference, and how do they affect my risk?
- How often should I return for heart health check-ups?

Understanding your family history can be helpful. Heart disease and stroke sometimes run in families, so knowing about your family's health can offer valuable insights into your own wellbeing.



10 Top Tips for a Healthy Heart

1. **Know the symptoms of a heart attack:**

A heart attack is a medical emergency that can happen at any time to anyone, regardless of gender. It is crucial that everyone knows the symptoms of a heart attack as getting treatment quickly can save your life. Check back on this section of the booklet.

2. **Manage your weight:** For some of us, this can be easy to talk about and hard to do. It may help if you focus on making small, achievable, long-term changes such as reducing your portion sizes. This can help get your weight and waist circumference into a healthy range and importantly, keep it there.

3. **Eat well:** A healthy balanced diet is vital for gut and heart health. Aim to eat less sugar or salt, avoid ultra-processed food and instead eat more wholegrains, fruit and vegetables.

4. **Move more:** Aim for 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity a week. A brisk walk or an activity like dancing or gardening can help keep you fit. Listening to your body and finding a routine that feels right for you is key.

5. **Know your numbers:** If you live in England and are between 40 and 74 years old, you may be invited to your free NHS Health Check – do go along as you will have your cardiovascular risk levels calculated and explained. Get a home monitor or take opportunities to get your blood pressure measured when possible.

6. **Bring down high blood pressure:** If you have been diagnosed with high blood pressure, seek advice from your GP about how to lower it through diet, exercise, improving wellbeing, being kind to yourself and medication.

7. **Control your cholesterol:** Avoid developing high cholesterol with a healthy balanced diet and take your medications if you are prescribed them.

8. **Avoid smoking and limit alcohol:** Quitting smoking is one of the best steps you can take for your heart health. Your GP or NHS Stop Smoking Services can provide support—call the free Smokefree National Helpline on 0300 123 1044. To protect your heart, men and women should aim to drink no more than 14 units of alcohol per week. One unit of alcohol is roughly equivalent to:

- Half a pint of average-strength beer, lager, or cider
- A single measure of spirits
- A small glass of wine
- A small bottle of alcopop

9. **Be kind to yourself:** Working to reduce your stress levels could lower your blood pressure and help you avoid developing unhealthy habits that you may turn to in order to cope. It is also important to make sure you are well rested, as getting enough sleep is important for both our general wellbeing and the health of our heart and blood vessels. Most adults should aim for seven to nine hours of sleep each night.

10. **Know your medical history and, if possible, your family history:** When you need medical advice, your doctor may need to know if you have a family history of cardiovascular disease or if you have had diabetes or high blood pressure during a pregnancy to assess your risks appropriately.

Try the Green Heart 30 Day Habit Tracker on the next page and discover simple steps to easily integrate heart-healthy habits into your daily routine.

Green Hearts Habit Tracker

The Green Hearts 30-Day Habit Tracker shows how small changes can lead to significant improvements in your health. Track your progress and tick off each day you embrace a new habit!

NEW HABIT	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Exercise ___ minutes per day												
Drink ___ litres of water per day												
Healthy Breakfast												
Healthy Lunch												
Healthy Dinner												
Practice mindfulness												
Alcohol-free day												
Smoking-free day												
Complaint-free day												
___ Hours of sleep												
Swapped _____ for _____												



www.irishheart.org

'We are what we repeatedly do'

Aristotle

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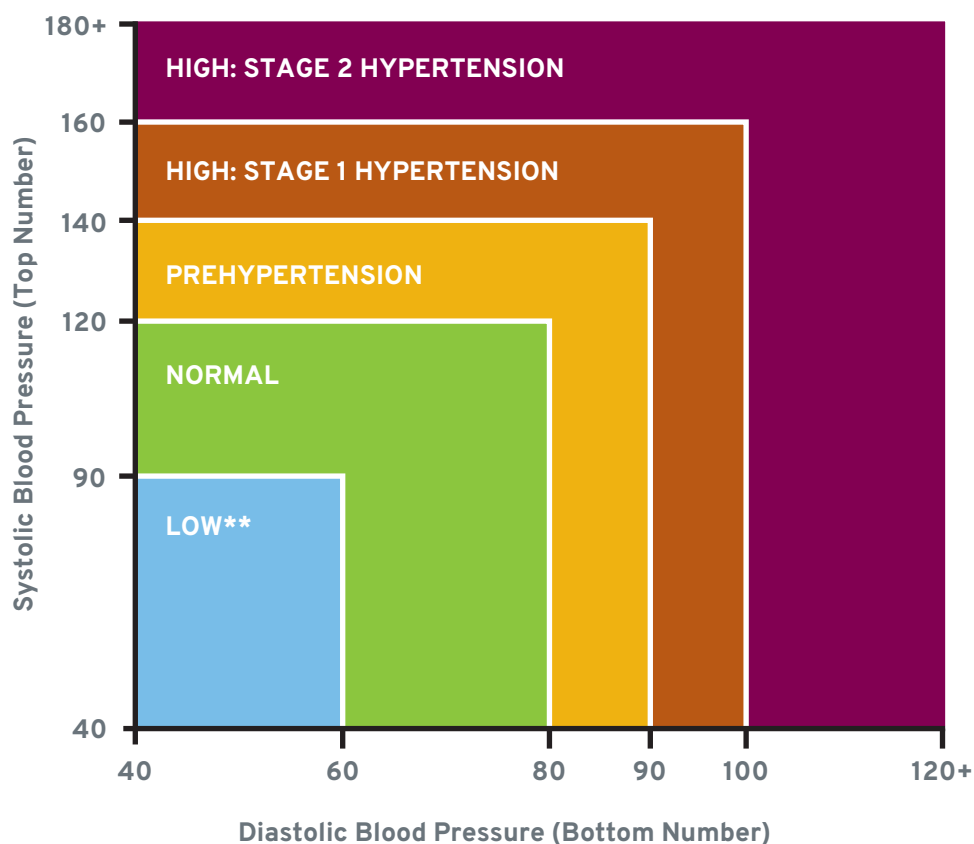
Green Hearts Blood Pressure Tracker

Use the below blood pressure tracker to chart your blood pressure

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Green Hearts Blood Pressure Chart

This Chart will help you figure out if your blood pressure is at a healthy level



If you have low or high blood pressure, speak with a healthcare professional. They could help develop a treatment plan to help you manage your levels and lower your risk of developing complications.



LEND YOUR SUPPORT



As an Individual

- Take our Green Hearts challenge! Download your free Green Hearts guide from the website.
- Become a Green Heart Champion, get in touch to find out how you can make a difference as a volunteer
- Host a Green Hearts awareness event at your workplace or local community organisation
- Make a donation

As a Business

- Become an official sponsor
- Find out how you can implement a Green Hearts initiative within your organisation
- Make a donation

Aa a Member Organisation

- Host a Green Hearts awareness event
- Find out how you can implement a Green Hearts initiative within your organisation

As an MP or Councillor

- Take our Green Hearts challenge! Download your free Green Hearts guide from the website.
- Engage in Green Heart awareness events
- Identify and support your local Irish Community service
- Make a donation



Visit our website at www.irishinbritain.org

To get in contact email health@irishinbritain.org

Scan here to access more of our heart health resources:

